



Bad boy with good friends

Ismene Brown

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Desperate for funds, dancer Michael Clark turned to his A-list artist chums – and the resulting auction could net a fortune. Ismene Brown meets him

What do you do if you need money and the bank won't help? Do you ask your friends to give something to sell, arrange an auction at Christie's – and bring in half a million quid?

You do if you are Michael Clark, the most extraordinary and extraordinarily well-connected dancer in modern Britain. Tomorrow, art by Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Anish Kapoor, Jim Lambie, Gary Hume, Tracey Emin and other prominent contemporary British artists goes under the hammer to help to consolidate the future of their mate's own art – Clark's dance company.

Christie's estimates a six-figure outcome – Hirst's Beclomethasone Dipropionate spot painting is estimated at £150,000-£200,000, Lucas's bendy doll on a bar stool at £80,000-£120,000 and Hume's kissing pricks at £40,000-£60,000.

There are affectionate photographs (Wolfgang Tillmans, Sam Taylor-Wood) and enigmatic sculptures (Angus Fairhurst, Rebecca Warren), as well as sexually bold images reflecting the notoriety of the wildest child ever seen in British dance.

Punk, drugs, gay fantasy, reckless love, all fed fruitfully into his meteoric young career, the exquisite Apollonian in Dionysian trappings, classical ballet dressed in dildos, platform boots and violently scrawled lipstick, before he crashed to earth in the mid-1990s as a desperate drug addict, all spent out.

But the questions Clark never stopped asking about how to stage dance brought him a prodigious variety of friends. Draw a circle between the Young British Artists, the more frayed edges of rock music, high fashion (Kate Moss is a patron) and serious classical dance (his other patron is Mikhail Baryshnikov), and you can find Michael Clark open-mindedly ensconced at any point.

The influential art gallerist Sadie Coles is one of his board members; she arranged this auction and got the artists (many of whom are hers) to risk their work at auction for Michael – an act of considerable generosity.

Clark, abstemiously sipping half a pint of lager near the Barbican, where he's preparing to open Mmm..., his version of Stravinsky's enormous Rite of Spring, sounds faintly embarrassed. He's 44, but still wears that nappy pin in his ear.

"I really want to emphasise how grateful I am to the artists," he mumbles. He hasn't seen the sale art yet, because for him this is still an emotionally complicated bit of friends rallying round.

"We all have days when we're not at our best, and it's an extraordinarily encouraging thing on a very basic level that these people believe in me. It means I have to pull my finger out.

"Part of why I've been able to continue is that I think my work has as much, if not more, in common with ideas in the visual arts as with dance. I think this always made sense to me. But I've always wanted my work to pay for itself – I wanted to find a way to make it necessary."

A view apparently not, so far, taken by the Arts Council, whose ungenerous £200,000 subsidy covers only one season's touring costs for Mmm... and makes no commitment to Clark to develop productions or employ permanent dancers – of whom he wants only four.

The choreographer's is a meagre reality. His dancers earn just £400 a week. Renting a rehearsal studio costs £1,000 a week. Clark lives in a one-room flat.

Spelling out these privations to friends who happened to command a lot of money for their art was unsettling, he says. "I found it quite painful if they said no, actually."

Few tangible relics remain of his outrageous back catalogue. For years he lovingly stored costumes and props by his visual collaborators Leigh Bowery, Bodymap, Trojan and other notorious taste-shapers, until his drug crisis 10 years ago, when the storage company sold them to pay his rent arrears.

Then, a future for his fascinating, combustible talent seemed unlikely. Now, a large future beckons, with Clark tackling the enormous challenge of a trilogy of Stravinsky ballets, of which *Mmm...* is the second, and considering an invitation from the Kirov Ballet. Tomorrow's auction underlines the relationship between adventuresome dance and visual art, a relationship much prized in Diaghilev and Stravinsky's time.

I ask Clark how much of his friends' work he possesses personally. His answer is typically imaginative. "My art collection is in my head," he says. "Things people have said they'll give me when I have somewhere to put it. I quite like the fact that it exists in my mind, rather than in reality."

- The Michael Clark Benefit Sale is tomorrow at Christie's, St James's, London SW1
- '*Mmm...*' is at the Barbican Theatre, Oct 27-Nov 4



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